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ABSTRACT

Friendships of early adolescence are generally accepted as having special significance for psychological development. This study was conducted to examine the sources of conflict between friends during early adolescence; to assess the social-cognitive developmental level of early adolescents; and to explore the relationships among sources of friendship conflict, social-cognitive developmental level, and outcome measures of self-esteem, self-perceived social skills, and social competence. Data were obtained through structured interviews with 88 sixth-graders. A taxonomy of nine conflict categories was developed from spontaneous reports of friendship conflicts. The salience in early adolescence of 12 common sources of friendship conflicts suggested by the literature was assessed. Responses to two hypothetical social problem-solving dilemmas were coded for social-cognitive developmental level based on Selman's (1984) Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies Interview. The findings revealed gender differences: girls' friendships appeared to be more exclusive, committed, and concerned with issues of trust, intimacy, and aspects of the emotional connection than were friendships of boys. Boys' expressed friendship concerns seemed more focused on issues dealing with autonomy and individuality. Higher social-cognitive developmental levels were associated with higher self-perceived social skills and self-esteem. (NB)

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Conflict Between Friends During Early Adolescence: Sources, Strategies, and Outcomes

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Poster presented at the 97th annual convention
of the American Psychological Association
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ABSTRACT

This study sought to further the understanding of conflict and interpersonal negotiation within friendships during early adolescence.

Data was obtained through structured interviews of 88 sixth-graders (42 boys, 46 girls). A taxonomy of nine conflict categories was developed from spontaneous reports of friendship conflicts. The salience in early adolescence of twelve common sources of friendship conflicts, suggested by the literature, was assessed. Responses to two hypothetical social problem-solving dilemmas were coded for social-cognitive developmental level based on Selman's (1984) Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies Interview.

Interrelationships among conflict sources, social-cognitive developmental level, self-perceived social skills and self-esteem were examined. Gender differences were found and discussed.

CONFLICTS WITH FRIENDS DURING EARLY ADOLESCENCE: SOURCES, STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES

INTRODUCTION

Friendships of early adolescence are generally accepted as having special significance for psychological development (Hartup, 1983; Sullivan 1953). Important developmental influences such as onset of puberty, changes in the social environment, and continued development of cognitive abilities are both reflected in and impact the nature of early adolescent friendships (Berndt, 1982).

Much of the research on early adolescent friendship has focused on the conceptions or expectations held for friendships. Developmental changes in children's friendships have been described, for example, in changing expectations for sharing common activities, acceptance, loyalty, genuineness, and potential for intimacy (Bigelow, 1977; 1982). Expectations for the potential for intimacy within friendships, for example, are found to occur later in the developmental sequence, while expectations that friends will engage in common activities appear much earlier.

Friendship has been conceptualized as the "arena for developing views on cooperation and intimacy" (Nelson & Aboud, 1985, p. 1009). Because peer conflict has been

proposed as the major mechanism for cognitive development (Piaget, 1932), an examination of conflict between friends may afford a unique opportunity to view the cutting edge of social-cognitive development. Indeed, evidence shows that conflict negotiation between friends is qualitatively different than between peers in general (Ladd & Emerson, 1984) and may promote more social development than conflict between nonfriends (Nelson & Aboud, 1985). Thus, a unique window onto developing interpersonal competence may be found in an examination of friendship conflict.

Purpose

The purposes of this paper are: 1) to describe the sources of conflict between friends during early adolescence; 2) to assess the social-cognitive developmental level of early adolescents; and 3) to explore the relationships among sources of friendship conflict, social-cognitive developmental level, and outcome measures of self-esteem, self-perceived social skills and social competence.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects in this study were 88 (42 boys, 46 girls) Caucasian sixth-graders participating in a larger, on-going research project (The Family-Peer Process Project, Cooper & Carlson, 1986). Subjects were from middle- to upper-middle class families (mean Hodge-Siegel occupational rating of head of household was 58.22 (Mueller & Parcel, 1981) .

Procedures

Self-report and interview data were obtained in the subject's school setting during an after-school session. Self-esteem of the adolescent was measured by the Global Self-Worth and the Perceived Social Acceptance subscales of the Self-Perception Profile for Children (Harter, 1985). Self-perceived social skills of Empathy, Assertiveness, and Expression of Feelings were measured by subscales of the Social Skills Scale for Children (Harter & Thompson, 1985). A measure of verbal ability was obtained with the vocabulary subtest of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (Wechsler, 1974).

The Friendship Interview, audiotaped and transcribed for analysis, was a three part structured interview. Subjects were first asked to identify issues about which they had had disagreements with their friends ("What are some things that

you have disagreed about with your friends? What kinds of things have caused disagreements between you and your friends?"). Next, twelve sources of conflict between friends suggested in the literature as important to early adolescents were presented and subjects were asked to respond (yes/no) as to whether each item had been a problem for them with a friend. Finally, a hypothetical dilemma interview was conducted to assess the style and developmental thought level of the early adolescents' interpersonal negotiation skills.

The Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies Interview (INS) was adapted from Selman (1980) and consisted of two hypothetical situations salient for early adolescence. The Dance Dilemma presented a dance situation in which the protagonist wants to dance with someone other than his girlfriend/her boyfriend. The Drinking Dilemma consisted of a situation in which the protagonist is pressured by a friend to drink beer at a party.

After each dilemma was presented, a series of questions and probes were used by the interviewer to obtain responses from the subject's suggested interpersonal negotiation solution for three functional problem-solving steps : defining the problem, generating a "good" strategy, and evaluating the outcome.

Responses were scored for developmental level according

to one of four progressively more mature underlying levels of social perspective coordination: 0=impulsive, 1=unilateral, 2=reciprocal, and 3=mutual/collaborative. Interpersonal style (1=submissive, 2=assertive) was scored for each strategy. Scoring was done by three trained coders using the INS Scoring Manual (Schultz, Yeates, & Selman, 1988).

Reliability was determined by comparison with the coder-trainer who independently scored all protocols. Reliability was assessed across six sets of data for each functional step and for interpersonal style. Percent direct agreement across all coding categories was high: range = 67% to 100%. Cohen's weighted kappa computed for each coding category was fair to good: defining the problem, mean kappa = .60 (range = .42 to .87), generating a strategy, mean kappa = .55 (.32 to .74), evaluating the outcome, mean kappa = .76 (.45 to 1.00), and interpersonal style, mean kappa = .85 (.68 to 1.00). Scores were obtained for each functional step of each dilemma and averaged to obtain an average interpersonal style score and three developmental level scores: Dance Dilemma Average Level, Drinking Dilemma Average Level, and an Overall Average Level. Average scores were used in all analyses.

An examination of the average scores for each problem-solving step and interpersonal style revealed that levels for defining the problem, generating a strategy, and evaluating

the outcome of the hypothetical dilemmas were highly intercorrelated ($r=.47$ to $.61$, $p<.001$). Interpersonal style was only correlated with strategy level ($r=.46$, $p<.001$) with higher developmental levels of strategies being associated with more assertive orientations. The two dilemmas were only moderately correlated with each other ($r=.33$, $p<.01$), reinforcing the notion of the importance of context.

Data Reduction

Spontaneously Reported Conflicts were separately written on cards and independently sorted by research assistants in order to develop a taxonomy derived from the data, rather than a priori theory. Three suggested sets of categories were quite similar and a final set was achieved through discussion. Five trained judges reclassified the conflicts and interjudge agreement was good (Cohen's kappa = .71) as determined by an extension of Cohen's kappa for use with more than two judges (Light, 1971). Nine categories represented two major relationship dimensions: quality of the emotional connection (Connectedness) and tolerance of differences (Individuality). (See Figure 1 for category definitions and examples).

RESULTS

Spontaneously Reported Conflicts

Number of conflicts reported by each subject ranged from

0 to 5 and frequencies across total conflicts reported were 4 for zero conflicts, 17 - two, 19 - three, 11 - four, and 18 - five. No differences in number of conflicts reported were found for gender or verbal ability.

Nine categories representing two major relationship dimensions: quality of the emotional connection (Connectedness) and tolerance of differences (Individuality) were used to categorize the content of the reported conflicts (Figure 1). The frequencies across the nine categories are shown in Table 1. Friendship conflicts from Individuality categories were most frequently reported by this group of early adolescents. By far, preferences for which activities to engage in, such as what movie to see or which game to play, and attitudes toward objects such as clothes, sports, and music are a major context for friendship conflicts. These types of conflicts revolve around differences of opinion which highlight the struggle for asserting one's unique developing self within a relationship.

Although much less frequently, some conflicts reported reflected a concern with qualities of the emotional connection of the friendship. Issues of trust, such as being able to depend on your friend and feeling safe to disclose oneself to a friend, appear to be emerging in this sample of early adolescents. Elements of hierarchy within the

friendship and the management of negative affect between friends are also sources of conflict. Importantly, nearly all subjects whose conflict reports included a Connectedness conflict also reported one or more Individuality conflicts.

In summary, early adolescents' friendship conflicts reflect the importance of this stage of development for establishing one's individuality and suggest the debut of concern for the balancing of individuality with a emotional sense of connection.

Next, the spontaneously reported conflicts were examined for gender differences on conflict categories. Because total number varied across subjects and frequencies in some categories were relatively low, Yule's Q was used. The Yule's Q is a statistic used to assess the intensity of a relationship independent of sample size. It is a measure of association that is used in log-linear work. At ranges between -1.0 and +1.0 it is symmetric and as it approaches zero the relationship becomes weaker. Interpretation is similar to that of correlations, although there is no test of significance.

Early adolescent girls were more likely than boys to relate conflicts based on issues of Trust, Hostility, Third Person, and Romantic Object. Boys were somewhat more likely to describe conflicts pertaining to Activities & Things,

Values & Norms, and Facts. When conflicts were collapsed into the two broader dimensions, Yule's Q = .27; compared to boys, girls displayed a somewhat greater likelihood of reporting Connectedness versus Individuality conflicts.

Subjects who had reported only conflicts falling into the Individuality dimension ("Individuality Kids") were next compared to those whose spontaneously reported conflicts included at least one conflict in the Connectedness dimension ("Connectedness Kids"). Interestingly, "Connectedness Kids" (n=23) reported about a third fewer conflicts overall than did "Individuality Kids" (n=61), $F=6.10$, $p < .016$. Furthermore, "Connectedness Kids" had higher verbal ability scores, $F = 8.15$, $p < .006$, and higher global self-esteem scores, $F = 6.64$, $p < .013$.

In summary, as a group, these early adolescents most frequently cited conflicts based on differences of opinion about activities or objects reflecting the salience of common interests for friendships as a context for individuation. Subjects whose spontaneous reports of friendship conflicts reflected a concern with the quality of the emotional connection rather than simply tolerance of difference issues, had higher verbal ability and global self-esteem. For girls more than for boys, conflicts revolved around issues of trust, acceptance and persons outside the friendship dyad.

Boys' friendship conflicts suggest that compared to girls, issues of individuality and self-assertion are more salient friendship concerns.

Endorsed Conflicts of Early Adolescence

The twelve sources of friendship conflicts presented to this group of early adolescents varied in their salience; percentages of the total group endorsing each conflict item ranged from 21.0% to 69.3% (Table 2). For the entire group, items describing superficial dress norms and the role of popularity in determining friendships were the least frequently endorsed as having been a source of conflict with friends (items 6, 7, and 11). In contrast, at least half of the subjects responded that items concerned with sharing the same interests, balancing self-interest with commitment to a friend, and being able to trust your friend to keep secrets (items 5, 9, and 12) had caused problems for them with a friend.

Significant gender differences were seen for six of the items. More boys than girls cited items reflecting peer pressure and friends backing out of planned activities (items 1 and 4) as having been a source of friendship conflict . Compared to boys, girls displayed more frequent endorsement of items concerning secrets and "right" ways to fit in (items 2, 3, 11, and 12).

In summary, early adolescents' friendship conflicts suggest that sharing common interests, balancing self interest with commitment or concern for others, and being able to depend on the integrity of the relationship are important qualities for friendships. Gender differences on response patterns suggest that girls' conflicts with their friends reflect importance for relationship concerns of exclusivity, trust, and belonging, while friendship conflicts for boys suggest salience for issues of autonomy and independence.

Interpersonal Strategies Interviews

Mean scores for this sample of early adolescents were 1.30 for the Dance Dilemma, 1.20 for the Drinking Dilemma, 1.23 for Overall Average Level, and 1.70 for Interpersonal Style. Early adolescents in this sample displayed interpersonal negotiation skills reflecting a level only somewhat above the use of unilateral, action-oriented strategies, such as one-way commands or simple and unchallenging accommodation, which recognize the other's perspective but do not coordinate perspective. Although no gender differences were found for the Average Dance Dilemma Score, the Overall Average Level, or for Interpersonal Style, Average Scores for the Drinking Dilemma were higher for girls than for boys, $F=4.39$, $p<.05$.

In summary, as a group, these early adolescents have not yet reached the more reciprocal, psychologically based level of negotiating, seen in the use of reciprocal exchanges, trading, and persuading that reflects coordination of both parties' perspectives.

Relationships Among Friendship Conflicts, Perceived Competence, and Interpersonal Negotiation Level

Relationships among variables were examined. Not surprisingly, a higher number of spontaneously reported conflicts was associated with more frequent endorsement of a presented conflict source for seven of the twelve items. Subjects were consistent in their degree of openness across the two tasks. Early adolescents who endorsed items 1,3,4, or 5 as sources of conflict displayed a more assertive interpersonal style in the dilemma interview. A review of these items reveals that they concern confronting a challenge to one's self-interest, maintaining a boundary between self and friend, and maintaining one's interests and desires in the face of pressure to conform. Thus, subjects whose interpersonal style was more assertive, reported having experienced conflicts with friends that revolved around issues of self-assertion.

The "Connectedness Kids", those subjects whose spontaneous conflict reports included at least one in the

Connectedness dimension, when compared to "Individuality Kids", those who had reported only Individuality conflicts, had significantly higher Developmental Level Average Scores on both dilemmas, on Overall Developmental Level, as well as higher global self-esteem.

Significant correlations were found between measures of self-perceived social competence and social-cognitive developmental levels displayed in the hypothetical conflict situations (Table 4). A higher level of self-perceived Expression of Feelings was associated with higher strategy scores and both Perceived Social Acceptance and Global Self-Esteem were positively related to Overall Level.

An examination of the correlation patterns reveals that more associations between self-perceived social competence and esteem were found for girls than for boys. For girls, higher social-cognitive levels were associated with self-perceived skills of Empathy, Expression of Feelings, Assertiveness, and the self-perceived competence measure of Global Self-Esteem. Interestingly, for girls only, higher self-perceived Assertiveness was associated with lower developmental levels on the functional step of defining the problem.

DISCUSSION

1. This study suggests that examination of sources of friendship conflict appears to be a valid means for assessing important qualities for early adolescent friendships. Consistent with previous research on friendship expectations, sharing common attitudes and interests is a highly salient friendship concern for early adolescents.

2. Gender differences found in this study are consistent with previous research. As seen in the types of conflicts they report having with friends, girls' friendships are more exclusive, more committed, and more concerned with issues of trust, intimacy, and aspects of the emotional connection than are friendships of boys. Boys' expressed friendship concerns seem more focused on issues dealing with autonomy and individuality. Whether this difference reflects true experiential differences or differences in expression can not be determined by this study.

3. Higher social-cognitive developmental levels were associated with higher self-perceived social skills and self-esteem. One explanation for this relationship is that interpersonal success increases positive feedback which in turn enhances self-perceived social competence and overall self-esteem. Alternatively, early adolescents with more

negative self-perceptions may display a lower developmental level as a result of some emotional mediating factors such as defensiveness or other personality factors, as suggested by Schultz (1989).

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Figure 1

Spontaneously Reported Friendship Conflicts: Category Definitions and Examples

I. Connectedness Conflicts- issues about the emotional quality of the relationship.

Trust- being able to depend on your friend; issues of integrity, respect, reliance, dependability, loyalty.
Examples: When a friend lies to me.
Telling a secret.

Competition- vying for status, prestige, or superiority with the friend; issues of the hierarchy or power structure within the friendship.
Examples: Who's better at something.
Who plays the video games first.

Hostility- expressing purposeful, aggressive, or hurtful behavior within the friendship.
Examples: I tease my friends about being stupid and stuff.
Doing something mean to a friend.

II. Individuality Conflicts- issues about toleration of differences.

Activities & Things- disagreement of opinions about activities to do or about things or objects.
Examples: Which game to play.
She doesn't like the food I do.

Values & Norms- disagreement of opinions about morals, values, standards, norms, etc.
Examples: Trying to cheat on a test.
About sneaking out at night.

With the Friend- disagreement of opinions about a member of the friendship dyad, about the friend himself, in terms of tolerating differences.
Examples: She's lazy and won't get up in the morning.
Bad moods.

Third Person- disagreement of opinions about a person outside the friendship dyad.
Examples: When a friend likes another person I don't like.
Which teachers we like.

Romantic Objects- disagreement of opinions about a romantic object outside the friendship dyad.
Examples: Friend may not like the guys you like.
Which girl is prettiest.

Facts- disagreement about what is factual; has an absolute reference for decision.
Examples: Answer to homework question.
About the words to a song.

Table 1

Frequencies of Sixth-Graders' Spontaneously Reported Conflicts Across Nine Categories

Connectedness Categories	Males	Females	Yule's Q
Trust	6	13	.40
Competition	8	6	-.15
Hostility	2	6	.52
Individuality Categories			
Activities & Things	64	45	-.30
Values & Norms	6	3	-.34
With Friend	5	5	.00
Third Person	13	30	.47
Romantic Object	2	5	.44
Facts	16	8	.36

Table 2

Percentages of Early Adolescents Endorsement of Presented Sources of Conflict Between Friends

1. When you make plans to do something with a friend and they get invited to do something more interesting with someone else.
2. Knowing the right way to act with boys/other boys.
3. Keeping something from best friends or parents told to you as a secret.
4. Being pressured to do things you don't want to do.
5. When your friend is interested in things that you aren't.
6. Being or staying friends with someone whether they are popular or not.
7. When your friend shows up someplace dressed in a weird way.
8. Knowing the right way to act with girls.
9. When you have made plans to do something with a friend and then you get asked to do something you want to do more.
10. When your friend puts you down in front of someone popular.
11. Knowing the right way to dress.
12. When friend does not keep a secret that you told them, but tells others.

Item	Total	Male	Female	Chi-Square
1.	47.7	54.7	41.1	2.71 *
2.	31.8	24.4	38.9	3.60
3.	41.7	33.7	49.4	3.82 **
4.	28.4	38.4	18.9	7.30 ***
5.	52.6	52.3	52.8	.00
6.	22.9	25.9	20.0	.56
7.	22.2	19.8	24.4	.32
8.	24.7	25.0	24.4	.00
9.	53.1	50.0	56.2	.45
10.	43.8	44.2	43.3	.00
11.	21.0	12.8	28.9	5.93 **
12.	69.3	61.6	76.7	4.00 **

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$

Table 3

Comparisons of Dimensions of Spontaneously Reported Conflicts With Friends On Verbal Ability, Self-Esteem, and Social-Cognitive Developmental Level

	Individuality Conflicts Only	At Least One Connectedness Conflict	F
Verbal Ability	11.19	13.13	8.15***
Global Self-Esteem	3.12	3.52	6.64**
Average Level for the INS Dance Dilemma	1.11	1.50	8.38***
Average Level for the INS Drinking Dilemma	1.10	1.30	3.80*
Overall Average Level	1.10	1.42	10.04***

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$

Table 4

Relationships Between Measures of Self-Perceived Social Competence and Measures of Social-Cognitive Developmental Level

	Average Scores for Interpersonal Negotiation Skills			
	Defining the Problem	Suggested Strategies	Drinking Dilemma	Overall Level
Empathy				
Total		.20*		
Males				
Females		.32*		
Expression of Feelings				
Total		.25*		
Males				
Females		.39*	.40*	
Assertiveness				
Total	-.21*		.29**	
Males				
Females	-.32*		.40*	
Global Self-Esteem				
Total			.31**	.25*
Males				
Females	.34*	.32*	.53**	.42*
Social Acceptance				
Total			.29**	.23*
Males	.29*			
Females				

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p<.001